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Ramadan, the Month of Fasting

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Islam is built on five pillars: *Shahadah*—faith; *Salat*—prayer; *Zakat*—a religious tax for the needy; *Sawm*—fasting; and *Hajj*—the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Each represents a unique utility or an institution through which the believer builds his or her relationship with the Creator and the Creation. Of all the pillars of Islam, none is more important than *Sawm*, fasting.

The month of fasting is called Ramadan, the ninth month in the Muslim calendar marking the time when the Holy Quran was sent down from heaven to the Prophet Mohammed (S.A.W). The daily period of fasting starts at the breaking of dawn and ends at the setting of the sun. The usual practice is to have a pre-fast meal (*suhoor*) before dawn and a post-fast meal (*iftar*) after sunset.

While voluntary fasting is recommended for Muslims, during Ramadan fasting becomes obligatory. There are certain exceptions: the sick and elderly, insane, physically disabled, non-Muslims, minors, those traveling, and women in certain conditions, and all of those people for whom an extended time without food or drink could be dangerous.

Ramadan is a special month of the year for over one billion Muslims throughout the world. It is a time for inner reflection, devotion to God, and self-control.

There are reasons and wisdom behind every single act in Islam, no matter how small and seemingly minor. Fasting is an annual practice containing all imaginable characteristics for human excellence. It is training for the body and soul, a renewal of life, encouraging the spirit of sharing and giving. Fasting has many benefits, but the general benefits are self-restraint, behavior modification, health care, patience, family ties, and social outlook.

The first lesson or wisdom to be gained in fasting is self-restraint. Fasting encourages in the heart the essence of consciousness of the Creator, moral courage (both in secret and manifest) guiding the heart, the seat of emotion from spoilage and moral indecency. Fasting controls two aspects of the human body that are seen as the root causes of human downfall—the stomach and the productive parts. The human body is constructed with the need to please the two of them, and in the process humans violate the rights of fellow human beings.

One of the most important things fasting affords the observer is to help control or change his or her habits since human life is an embodiment of attained habits. To change or control a habit is to wage a war on oneself. Now, one would be wondering: does a Ramadan fast control one's habits? Two of the most important habits are food and drink. An average person eats three meals a day, 21 meals a week. The way the fast is structured, with its basic and drastic change of eating habits, a "faster" takes light meals early in the morning and late in the evening. If the believer can control these two habits, food and drink, it will undoubtedly be easy to control other habits, including smoking, drug abuse, and illicit sex. If one can control one's tongue, hands and all other parts of the body for a month, it will be easy to apply the same training for the rest of the year.

The benefits of fasting rise above guiding the "faster" from idle talk and indecent acts. It is a guard against disease, provided the faster follows the strict dietary rule: eat during fast breaking and avoiding over-eating. A great many diseases originate from stomach indigestion, for the stomach is the origin of harmful bacteria. Even in the age of sophisticated machines, one cannot find a machine

so fragile, yet so remarkably durable and efficient, as the stomach. This is the machine that receives food particles, processes and refines them, and distributes the products to different parts of the body. This is a lifelong operation. For the non-faster, the stomach will have no chance for rest. When the stomach is empty, as a result of fasting, it gets well-desired rest, to renew and refresh its energy. With the fasting, the stomach is forced to go through a discharge whereby harmful remainders are eliminated through perspiration as the body searches for food during fast. During fast, the system of emission is organized, and this in turn benefits the blood pressure, reducing hardening of the arteries or blood vessels. The heart and kidney functions are enhanced as the work load decreases. The fast helps to correct the problem of fatness and diabetes.

Fasting also helps in conditioning the heart, the soul, and the body on the virtues of patience, tenacity, and firmness in the face of hardship or difficulty. Patience is the base of self-mastery, discipline, and spiritual agility. Patience is to turn the phrase "I can't" into "I can." It is to say, the difficult is easy. It is an inner and psychological destruction of things perceived by others as impossible.

Additionally, fasting strengthens family ties, especially in an era when the family is an endangered institution in every society. It forces the family to gather together to break fast and eat together at least twice a day for a month, creating for more bonding opportunities. It also enhances and energizes friendship, as Ramadan is known as the month of invitations and visitations. Friends, family members and neighbors extend invitations to each other to come to their homes to break their fasts together.

Socially, fasting is an expression of unity with the poor, the family, and the whole society. This is a period in which the rich have first-hand experience of what it is to be poor, the pains the needy suffers in normal living conditions. The discipline resulting from Islamic fasting instills in the rich the virtue of mercy, which is very important in terms of social well-being and production of harmony.

Undoubtedly, Ramadan helps a serious believer remold, reshape, reform, and renew his or her physical and spiritual disposition and behavior, and if the faster wants to gain the total rewards of fasting, he or she should not only restrain from food and drink, but also refrain from obscene thoughts, acts, and behaviors.